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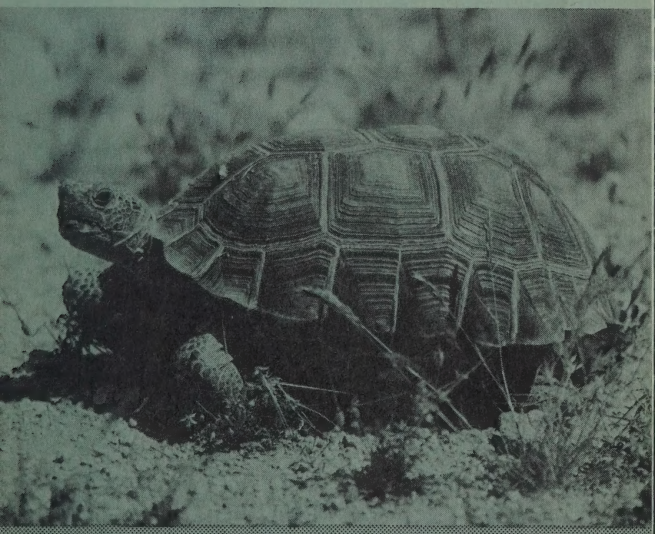
California Desert

Desert Tortoise Natural Area



UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

BAKERSFIELD DISTRICT
OFFICE

DESERT TORTOISE NATURAL AREA

The Desert Tortoise Natural Area is being established to protect an area of critical desert wildlife habitat which has the highest known density of desert tortoises. Populations are estimated to be as high as 2,000 tortoises in one 640-acre section, or one square mile.

The natural area is being established by the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Department of the Interior, with the assistance of the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Incorporated, in order to protect this unique habitat in its natural state, free from conflict with other land uses.

BLM closed the 12,000-acre portion of public land in the tortoise preserve to off-road vehicle use in November 1973, and closure signs were installed. A habitat management plan has been prepared, and more than 25 miles of fence have been constructed. Public lands within the natural area also have been closed to livestock grazing. The total area encompasses 24,320 acres, including private lands.

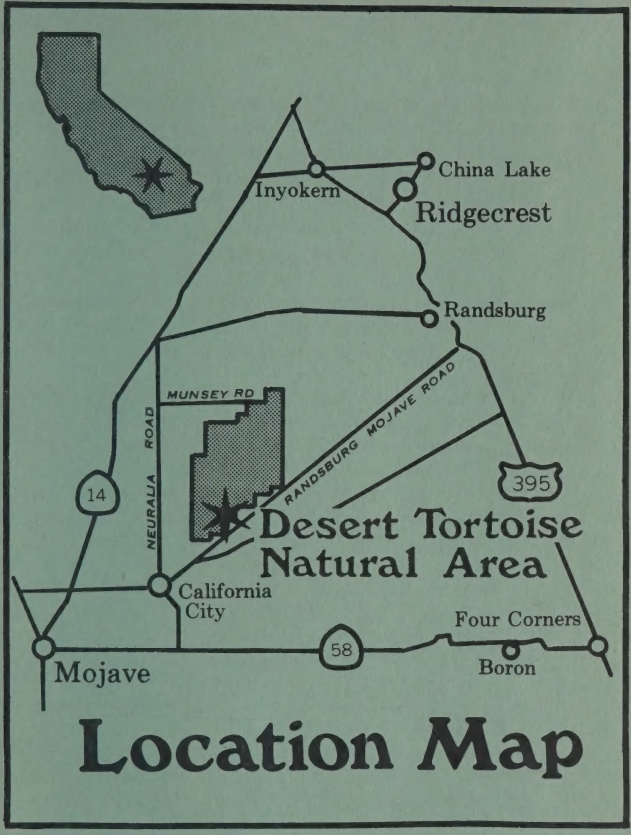
Formal designation of the natural area will take place after the lands are formally withdrawn from laws allowing prospecting and mining on public lands. Preliminary surveys have found no valuable minerals. A notice of the proposed withdrawal has been issued for public review and comment.

THE DESERT TORTOISE

The Desert Tortoise (Gopherus agassizi) is the official California State reptile. It is long-lived, slow to mature, and has a low reproductive potential. The tortoise matures at 14 to 20 years of age, and lives 60 to 100 years. The young are hatched from eggs and receive no care from adult tortoises. The hatchlings have soft shells, so they are in greater danger than adult tortoises from predators.

Tortoises live in underground burrows which shelter them from the summer sun and provide a place to hibernate in the winter. Creosote bush, which predominates the area, supplies vital shade for tortoises, and the plant's root systems stabilize the burrows.

Tortoises feed on annual wildflowers and grasses in the spring and, when available, in the fall. The spring nourishment often must carry the tortoise through the summers, the fall, and hibernation in the winter, when it must depend on the fat and water stored within the body.



Location Map

CALIFORNIA DESERT

The California Desert Conservation Area was established by Congress in 1976 with the goal of providing "for the immediate and future protection and administration of the public lands of the California Desert with the framework of a program of multiple use and sustained yield, and the maintenance of environmental quality."

The Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (Public Law 94-579) provided for a program with concurrent elements of: (1) comprehensive long-range planning for land and resource use, and (2) interim management actions to manage, use, and protect the public lands.

The Conservation Area contains some 25 million acres, of which half is public land administered by the Bureau of Land Management.

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PLANTS AND FLOWERS

The Desert Tortoise Natural Area is carpeted with annual wildflowers from March through May when the winter rains have been adequate for the germination of the seeds. Desert candles, blazing stars, Mojave asters, coreopsis, phacelia, and gilias are the most common flowers, but more than 160 different kinds of plants may be found. If rainfall is sparse, there will be few flowers and little food for the tortoises

OTHER WILDLIFE

Among the other animals in the area are the rare Mojave ground squirrel, coyote, desert kit fox, leopard lizard, collared lizard, chuckwalla, and western whiptail. Birds include sage sparrow, LeConte's thrasher, cactus wren, ladderback woodpecker, and ash-throated flycatcher. Snakes include the sidewinder and Mojave rattlesnake, both of which are venomous and should be avoided. All tortoises in the natural area are to be left undisturbed.

HUNTING

Hunting is permitted on the Desert Tortoise Natural Area, subject to seasons, limits, and other regulations established by the California Fish and Game Commission. Upland game species include chukar partridge, mourning dove, Gambel quail, cottontail, and jack rabbits. Hunting is on a walk-in basis only, with no vehicles allowed, and only shotguns may be used. Hunters are asked to help maintain the area by removing litter, spent shells, and remains of bagged game. Those wishing additional information should contact the Bureau of Land Management's Ridgecrest Area Office or Bakersfield District Office.

HELPING OUT

Visitors may help protect the tortoise and the natural area by observing a few rules:

--Collecting wild desert tortoises is prohibited by California law.

--Do not handle tortoises or approach them too closely. When frightened, tortoises may lose water from the bladder (water that can be reabsorbed) and can suffer fatal dehydration.

--Captive tortoises should not be released on the natural area; they may carry diseases which are hazardous to wild tortoises, and pets do not fare well in the wild.

--Dogs and cats should be kept on leashes and in the parking area only.

--Plants must not be picked or damaged; they are the tortoises' food.

--Visitors are asked to stay on marked trails.

--Vehicle use is forbidden in the area, except under special permit from BLM.

--Please don't litter; pack out what you packed in.

--Groups of more than 50 people must contact the BLM District Manager or Area Manager before visiting the area.

AREA LOCATION

The 38-square mile natural area is located in northeastern Kern County north of California City on the Randsburg-Mojave Road. It is about a two-hour drive from Los Angeles, 1½ hours from Bakersfield. At the natural area, visitors may observe and learn about the desert tortoise in its natural habitat.

Spring (April through June) is the best time of year to visit the area, for temperatures than are most agreeable to plant and animal life as well as to man. Tortoises are likely to be seen outside their burrows in the morning and late afternoon. From mid-June through February, tortoises are usually deep in their burrows and are seldom seen.

Visitors should bring a good supply of drinking water, as there is none at the natural area site. Sun glasses, a hat, jacket, or sweater, and stout shoes or boots are also recommended. Binoculars and a camera are other items for the visitor to bring. Visitors should watch their step because of the presence of venomous snakes.

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

The Bureau of Land Management, an agency of the Department of the Interior, is responsible for the conservation, management, and development of 447 million acres of public lands, 20 percent of the land area of the United States and 60 percent of all Federally owned lands. In addition, BLM has administrative responsibility for public mineral resources on 369 million acres of private and other Federally owned lands, and for some 1.1 billion acres on the outer continental shelf. The public lands are managed for multiple use, including timber, minerals, livestock grazing, wildlife, watershed, wilderness, and outdoor recreation.

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

As the nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department also assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in island territories under U.S. administration.

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